

How Russia and China could rechannel North Viet supplies

By Paul Wohl

Written for The Christian Science Monitor

However one looks at it, logistics will not prevent Soviet supplies from reaching Vietnam. Costs may go up considerably, but costs are no problem if Moscow and Peking have the will to see it through.

The main question for Moscow and Peking, assuming that the U.S. blockade of North Vietnamese ports is tightly maintained, is how to rechannel the flow of supplies.

The same question came up in 1967 and 1968.

In 1967 the United States Air Force made 700 air strikes against Haiphong. In one period the port was bombed 55 days and nights continuously. The bombing of inland supply routes never let up.

Yet in March, 1968, an American officer was quoted as saying: "Though we are flying 600 sorties a day, the supplies keep moving south."

Because of the heavy bombardment of the Haiphong area, material was being increasingly moved through China by rail, according to a Radio Moscow report on April 15, 1967.

During China's "cultural revolution" and in 1968, as a result of heavy floods in Kiangsi Province, Soviet transit shipments were repeatedly stopped or delayed. But this did not last.

In November, 1967, conditions for the transit of Soviet arms were formally agreed upon. And there does not seem to have been any serious hitch ever since.

Only Russia did not make much use of the Chinese transit route. According to Soviet sources, 85 percent of all Soviet and East European supplies, including food, fuel, and heavy equipment, were moved by sea.

The sea route, since the closing of the Suez Canal, is 15,600 miles long. The average cargo needs 42 to 45 days from a Black Sea port to Haiphong.

The rail route is about 7,000 miles and much faster, despite three different gauges. Russia has a 5-foot gauge, China a 4-foot, 8½-inch standard or English gauge, and Vietnam a narrow gauge.

"Another obstacle is the small carrying capacity of Chinese freight trains. And in 1967-68 Chinese tracks were known to be still in poor repair.

On May 20, 1971, Red Star, the daily of the Soviet armed forces, wrote that

in 1970 Soviet vessels had brought so many goods to Vietnam that their shipment by rail would have required 1,000 trains.

Red Star must have thought of the average carrying capacity of Soviet freight trains.

Although the Chinese have improved their roadbed substantially, their rolling stock is still largely of prewar vintage and of small size. Five- and 10-ton freight cars prevail.

In 1968 the U.S. Central Intelligence Agency estimated Vietnam's import requirements at about 6,000 tons a day. Last year, one can infer from the statement of a Haiphong port official, imports by sea alone amounted to more than 10,000 tons a day.

Requirements estimated

If we add imports by land, the total must have been larger.

If China's rails were to take over the entire volume of supplies now reaching North Vietnam, assuming an average load of 400 tons per Chinese freight train (a long train of 40 10-ton cars), more than 30 trains a day would be needed.

This is an optimistic estimate. The average Chinese freight trains probably move only 250 to 300 tons.

The North Vietnamese probably could manage for a long time with only a third of the supplies which they received last year. Overland shipment of 3,000 to 4,000 tons a day still would be difficult for China, but feasible.

Obstacles surmountable

Such a traffic load certainly would not strain the mighty Trans-Siberian. Soviet large-size freight cars can move as near as the Sino-Mongolian border.

Transshipment for all but very bulky loads is no problem. The Soviets have the world's largest fleet of freight containers, which can be lifted easily from the platform of a large-gauge freight car to that of a standard-gauge vehicle.

Transshipment at the Vietnamese border would be more difficult. But considering the vast East Asian manpower pool, this too could be handled.

For especially sensitive and urgently needed material the Soviets might try to use the air route via India.

Now that India has moved closer to the Soviet Union, New Delhi may have fewer hesitations about occasional Soviet transit flights.

Additional avenues of approach to Vietnam may be opened if Peking cooperates more closely with Moscow. While the Chinese would not allow Soviet planes to fly regularly over their territory, freight for Vietnam could be unloaded in a southern Chinese port and moved by rail or highway into Vietnam.

The Mines in Haiphong Harbor Won't Keep All Supplies Out of Hanoi's Hands

BY LESLIE H. GELB

For three years, President Nixon has been warning Hanoi and Moscow. If Hanoi stepped up the level of military activity in South Vietnam and endangered Vietnamization, the President said he would take "decisive action." Now, he has taken

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these actions: mining North Vietnamese ports, interdicting cargo transfers to smaller craft, bombing the rail links with China and attacking military targets in the North. But will these actions be "decisive"? And when?

I am not an expert on military supply problems. I am, however, familiar with the supply situation with respect to North Vietnam. Corrections, of course, would be welcome from the Pentagon if my facts or reasoning are faulty. My facts and reasoning are fully consistent with CIA estimates as revealed in the Pentagon Papers and by more recent CIA studies divulged by Senator Mike Gravel (D-Alaska).

The first question is what will Russia and China do? They provide nearly all the arms, ammunition and petroleum used by the North Vietnamese. Without their aid, Hanoi would have to change its strategy. But Moscow and Peking are not very likely to cut off or cut down on their aid. There is no reason to believe that they would leave their ally without bullets any more than we would. Moreover, Hanoi does not need as much aid as Saigon. U.S. aid to Saigon totals 8 to 10 times the Soviet-Chinese aid to Hanoi.

The next question is can Russia and China continue to supply North Vietnam in the face of the naval quarantine and bombing? The answer is yes. The plane, train, truck and people.

A maximum of about 75% of

the supplies reaching North Vietnam come by sea. The Russians could challenge the quarantine with mine sweepers and subs. The Chinese could launch air attacks against U.S. ships. But they are unlikely to do so given the enormous U.S. sea and air conventional superiority in the area and the risks of global confrontation. If mines are swept, new ones can be emplaced. North Vietnamese fast boats, armed with long-range ship-to-ship missiles, could attack and badly damage or sink some U.S. vessels. But such actions would not break the quarantine. Barges and small boats emanating from the China coast and landing on beaches and small ports at night could get through. In sum, the quarantine could be 90% effective. But the point is sea transport is a convenience, not a necessity.

The Russians have a large fleet of heavy cargo aircraft, big enough to haul tanks. This would be the fastest and easiest way to make up the sea transport deficit—especially if they could overfly China. President Nixon has not discussed this possibility, but is unlikely to shoot down Soviet aircraft.

The capacity of the two rail lines connecting China and North Vietnam could be increased significantly. Even if the United States blows up the tracks by day, they can be repaired in a matter of hours. Therefore, fully loaded trains running regularly by night could even result in no decrease in rail transport by present levels.

Trucks coming from China also would put a hefty bite into the sea transport deficit. Roads would need improvement, but sufficient trucks are available. Night-driving trucks are not easy to destroy, as indicated by the U.S. bombing experience on the Ho Chi Minh Trail.

Supplies for rail and trucks could be unloaded by Soviet troops at Chinese ports.

If worse comes to worst, people

can carry supplies on their backs. The Chinese have done it before. The North Vietnamese lugged tons of heavy equipment to the hills surrounding Dien Bien Phu in 1954.

All of this would take a period of adjustment, say one to three months. When this period is completed, my guess is that total transport into North Vietnam would not be reduced by more than 50% and probably closer to 25%.

Meanwhile, the North Vietnamese have extensive stockpiles of equipment and ammunition in the North, in Laos and Cambodia, and in South Vietnam itself—not to mention what they can capture. These supplies probably could last months, if not six months, depending on rates of consumption. In other words, were Hanoi to adopt a less offensive posture in the coming months, their supplies would last a long time. Moreover, there would be little to fear from a successful counter-offensive by Saigon. Saigon

forces are not well enough led or motivated for such a venture.

Will the President's actions, then, be decisive? No. Certainly not in the short run, where Hanoi has sufficient supplies for the present offensive. The current battles over Hue and Kontum will not be affected at all. Nor will his actions be decisive in the long run. Hanoi will once again have to tighten its belt. It may even be compelled to moderate its offensive in three or four months. Hanoi can and will fight on.

The difference between X and Y tons of supplies is not what this war is all about. It is a civil war and a war for national independence that began in the early 1940s. Hanoi had more to fear militarily in the late 40s against the French and in 1968 when faced with more than half a million U.S. forces.

In time, the quarantine and the stepped-up bombing will be seen for what they are—another tragic loss won by outside force.